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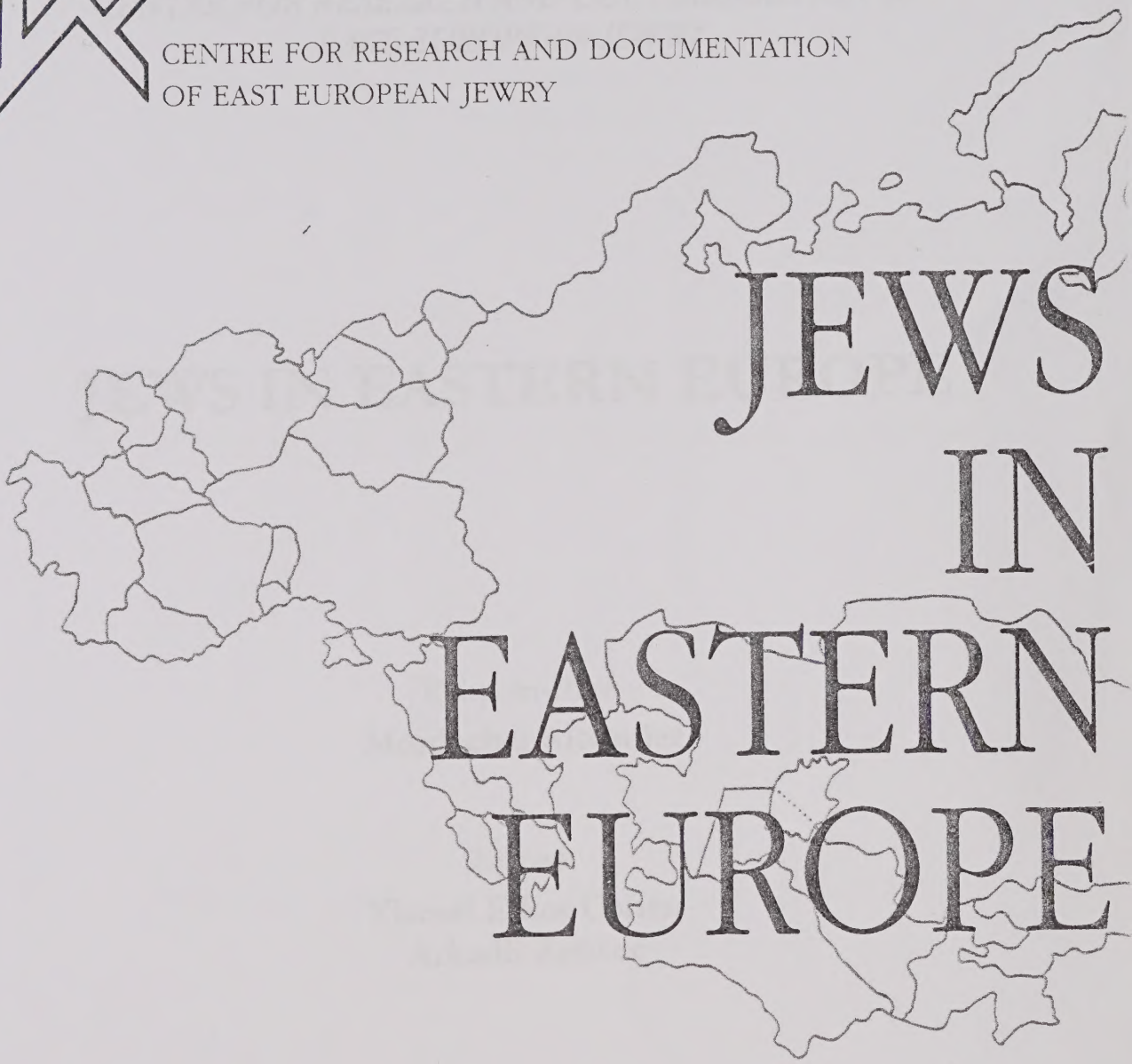

JEWS IN EASTERN EUROPE

3 (43)

WINTER 2000

THE HEBREW UNIVERSITY OF JERUSALEM

CENTRE FOR RESEARCH AND DOCUMENTATION OF EAST-EUROPEAN JEWRY

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WINTER 2000

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Jews in Eastern Europe *is the continuation of*
Jews and Jewish Topics in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe

ISSN 0793-4041
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The Centre for Research and Documentation of East-European Jewry
Givat-Ram, 91904 Jerusalem, Israel
(*annual subscription: $40 for 3 issues*)

Printed by Ahva Press

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Transnistria and the Holocaust in Romanian Historiography

Yosef Govrin

The name "Transnistria" was given by Romania to the region between the Dniester and Bug Rivers in the western Ukraine, after it was captured by the German Nazi and Romanian fascist armies in July 1941, two weeks after the beginning of the German surprise attack on the Soviet Union. Ghettos and concentration camps were then set up in this region for the Jews of Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Dorohoi, who were deported there in the fall of 1941 and the summer of 1942. This was done by order of the fascist ruler of Romania, Marshal Ion Antonescu, in order to effect their gradual annihilation.

This deportation was preceded by pogroms and mass murders of Jews in Bessarabia and northern Bukovina, perpetrated by the invading Romanian army and local collaborators. These were viewed as acts of revenge since the Jewish population of these areas was accused by Romania of enthusiastically welcoming the Red Army when Romania was forced to yield these territories to the USSR on June 28, 1940 (according to the secret annex of the Ribbentrop-Molotov non-aggression pact of August 1939 that divided parts of Eastern Europe into spheres of influence of Germany and the Soviet Union).

Thousands of Jews were killed during the deportations to Transnistria, which were carried out with great cruelty. Many others perished in Transnistria itself from hunger, cold, and illness, or were simply murdered.[1]

Throughout the Communist period, as well as in the post-Communist one, Romanian historiography has basically passed over in silence the mass murder of thousands of Jews by the Romanian army that took place before the deportation of the survivors to their gradual liquidation in ghettos and camps in Transnistria.[2] From this point of view, Romanian historians were

1. The minority who survived, due to the liberation of the region by the Red Army in March 1944, gradually returned to the places of their previous residence as the Red Army advanced through Romania.
2. This topic was been dealt with by historians in Israel and America. For examples, see the following: Teodor Lavi, ed. *Pinkas hakehilot Romaniya* (Yad Vashem, Jerusalem,

among the few remaining historians in Europe who avoided dealing with historical documentation that was available in their national archives and attempting to present to their people evidence of the crimes of their fascist government against the Jews in their country.

One can argue that for forty two years Romanian historiography was controlled by a Communist regime and, especially during the Ceausescu years, was limited by a nationalist-Communist ideology that militated against dealing with the Jews as a separate nationality, much less with crimes against them by the Romanian majority. However, even ten years after the fall of the Communist regime and its replacement by a democratic one, this approach still dominates Romanian historiography.

In order to survey Romanian post-Antonescu historiography of the Holocaust, one needs to first decide on periodization. After the Antonescu regime Romanian historiography can be said to comprise three periods. The first extended from the anti-fascist revolt on August 23, 1944 to the establishment of the Communist regime on December 30, 1947. The second, Communist period lasted from early 1948 until the end of 1989, including Stalin's rule and continuing until the end of Ceausescu's 25-year rule. The third, post-Communist period, which is now continuing, basically started in 1990.

1. From the End of Fascism to the Start of Communism

During the immediate post Antonescu period, two main books were published. *Cartea Neagra* by Matatias Carp[3] documented for the first time the mass murder of Jews in Bessarabia and Bukovina. His third volume deals with the deportations to the concentration camps and ghettos in Transnistria. Carp's

1969), Vol. 1, pp. 349-388; Jean Ancel, ed. *Documents Concerning the Fate of Romanian Jewry during the Holocaust* (New York, 1986), 12 vols.; *Transnistria*, (Tel Aviv University, Atlas, Bucharest, 1998); Avigdor Shahan, *Bekfor halohet* (In the burning cold) (Tel-Aviv, 1989), Shmuel Ben-Zion, *Yeladim yehudiim betransnistriya* (Jewish children in Transnistria) (Haifa-Jerusalem, 1989). See the chapter on Transnistria in Raoul Hilberg, *The Destruction of European Jews* (Chicago, 1961); Randolph Braham, ed., *The Tragedy of Romanian Jewry* (New York, 1994) and *The Destruction of Romanian and Ukrainian Jews during the Antonescu Era* (New York, 1997) both of which include articles by him, and Radu Ioanid, *The Holocaust in Romania, the Destruction of Jews and Gypsies under the Antonescu Regime, 1940-1944* (Chicago, 2000).

3. M. Carp, *Cartea Neagră* (The Black Book), 3 volumes (Bucharest, 1946-1947).

description of the stages of the Holocaust of the Jews of Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Dorohoi is supported by documentation collected during the time he served as general secretary of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Romania. Carp is considered the founder of the historiography of the Holocaust of the Jews of Romania: all subsequent research published in Israel and in the West has relied on his work.

The other important work of this period was Lucretiu Patrascanu's *Problemele de bază ale României*,[4] published in the fall of 1944 and revised in 1946. This book contains an important chapter entitled "The Systematic Annihilation of the Jews under the Antonescu Regime." The author was a top-ranking Communist who served as minister of justice in the first Communist government in Romania. In 1954 he was sentenced to death in a Communist show trial and executed. Patrascanu was rehabilitated in 1969 and his works were reprinted in 1975 and 1980. Although these included his book *Problemele...*, the chapter on the annihilation of the Jews was not republished. Although Patrascanu was more of a Marxist ideologist than a professional historian, his work is worth citing:

> The acts of murder, both individual and collective, that the Legionaires [the Iron Guard] committed against the Jews were followed by the systematic murder of masses of Jews. Official pogroms were organized by soldiers and government authorities, who were responsible for the killings. Others were condemned to death by hunger and cold. Tens of thousands of people – men, women, children, and old people – were deported in winter beyond the Dniester. It is not possible to justify even one of these cruel, barbaric acts as a necessity of war...[5]

While Carp and Patrascanu may have differed in regard to Communist ideology, they shared a perspective in regard to the Holocaust of the Jews of Bessarabia and Bukovina. Another thing they had in common was the significance of their works. Both before and after the establishment of Communism

4. L. Pătrăşcanu, *Problemele de bază ale României* (Basic Problems of Romania) (Bucharest, 1944).

5. Ibid., p. 210; see also Victor Eskenasy "The Holocaust and Romanian Historiography: Communist and Near Communist Revisionism" in *The Tragedy of Romanian Jewry*, op. cit., pp. 173-236.

in Romania, their works were known, even if they were not reprinted, or even cited, during the Communist regime.

2. The Communist Period

During the 42-year long Communist period not only were no serious works published about the deportations to Transnistria and the mass murders that preceded them, but the national identity of the Jewish victims was generally not mentioned.[6] They were subsumed under the total number of "civilian victims" of the fascists, as was the case in the Soviet Union with its historiography of Holocaust denial.[7] A prime example of this practice was provided by the Communist leader himself. In discussing the mass murder of Jews in Jassy on June 29-30, 1940, Ceausescu wrote:

> Right after the outbreak of the anti-Soviet war pogroms were organized against the anti-fascist forces. During them more than 2,000 people [N.B., he did not say Jews] were killed in Jassy.[8]

Transnistria, to which thousands of Jews were deported, is only mentioned in connection with its location, across the Dniester, and as Soviet territory that was temporarily occupied by the Romanian army. Nor is further information provided in the book about Jassy by Karetki and Covaci.[9] They wanted to stress the fact that Romanian Jews were saved during the Holocaust. This point is true as long as one understands that it applies only to the Jews of part of Romania, the Regat and southern Transylvania. A footnote in the introduction gives an indication of its method of absolving Antonescu of responsibility:

6. An exception was made in regard to a few trials, when Jews were mentioned along with other Romanian civilians as victims of the fascist regime.
7. See, Lucjan Dobroszycki and Jeffrey S. Grock, eds. *The Holocaust in the Soviet Union* (Armonk, New York-London, 1993), especially, Dalia Ofer "The Holocaust in Transnistria: A Special Case of Genocide," pp. 133-154.
8. N. Ceauşescu, *România pe drumul construirii societaţii socialiste multilateral dezvoltate* (Romania on the Path to Building a Developed Socialist Cultural in a Multi-lateral Way) (Bucharest, 1975), p. 570. The Jewish community reported the figure of 12, 000 Jews killed.
9. A. Kareţki and M. Covaci, *Zile însîngerate la Iaşi 28-30 Iunie 1941* (*Days of Blood in Jassy, June 28-30, 1941*) (Bucharest, 1978).

> The deportations beyond the Dniester [it is not stated who is being deported or from where] that were carried out by Antonescu's regime were neither overtly or covertly intended to cause the annihilation of the deportees... although the latter did suffer from some violations of the law by representatives of the local authorities or by the murderers of the *einsatzkommandos* [i.e. German forces].

The introduction also adds insult to injury by claiming that Romania "had written a brilliant and unique page in history by returning to their country in 1943-1944 all those deportees saved despite the desire of the Nazis and the difficulties of transportation and supply." In fact, nothing of this kind happened.

To the best of our knowledge there is only one case, in 1964, of a work published during the Communist period that provided objective information about the tragedy. *La Roumanie pendant la deuxieme guerre mondiale*[10] stated that tens of thousands of Jews were expelled "to the region of the Bug" [i.e. Transnistria], and were killed there.

Lectures by Romanian scholars who took part in an Israel-Romanian symposium organized by Yad Vashem in Jerusalem (the lectures have not yet been published in their entirety) contained estimates of the number of Jews from Bessarabia and Bukovina who perished in Transnistria. However, the lectures did not mention the mass murders by the Romanian army during its conquest of Bessarabia, northern Bukovina and Transnistria.[11] Nor did they mention the murder of thousands of Ukrainian Jews by the Romanian army.

The fact that such information about the Holocaust perpetrated against Romanian Jews by the Romanian fascist regime was almost totally concealed from the younger generation in Communist Romaniá is surprising for several reasons. First, toward the beginning of Communist rule, even before the Al-

10. Ion Popescu-Puţuri, ed., *La Roumanie pendant la deuxieme guerre mondiale (*Romania during the Second World War) (Bucharest, 1964), pp. 50, 149.
11. Seminars on the Holocaust of Jews in Romania with participants from Romania and Israel took place on June 11-13, 1984 in Bucharest and June 8-10, 1988 in Jerusalem. Tendentiously edited abstracts appeared in the Romanian publication *Anale de Istorie*, 6, 1984, 3, 4, 1986, 5, 1988. These symposia took place within the framework of research cooperation between Yad Vashem and the Institute for Historical Research of the Communist Party of Romania, headed by Ion Popescu-Puţuri.

lies held the Nuremberg Trials, a Romanian court condemned Antonescu (as well as other Romanians) to death for their crimes against the Jews and their collaboration with Nazi Germany. Second, until the very end of its Communist rule, Romania celebrated its anti-fascist coup of August 23, 1944 against the Antonescu regime. Third, even the younger generation who grew up after this coup and had no part in the destruction of the Jews or in their persecution under the fascists, were kept from learning about this part of their people's history. Moreover, teaching about the persecution and mass murder of Jews under Romanian fascism would have been useful to the Communist regime in promoting its espoused opposition to fascism and racism.

However, there was a more important factor at work – the nationalistic ideology of the Communist Party in Romania, during the twenty five years of Ceausescu's rule, stressed the image of the Romanians as a homogeneous and cultured people. In this context, Romanian historiography focused on what it could claim as a Romanian accomplishment, saving the Jews of Romania (the Regat and southern Transylvania) from being deported to death camps. However, what the historians concealed was Romanian genocidal policy and behavior: the fact that soldiers of the Romanian army raped, robbed, and slaughtered tens of thousands of Jews in Bessarabia and northern Bukovina by order of Marshal Antonescu and the cruel deportation of the survivors to the ghettos and death camps of Transnistria in August-September 1941, even before Nazi Germany had adopted the "final solution" at Wannsee. The exposure of these facts would have contradicted the ideal image and myth of the Romanian people and would have challenged the nationalist ideology fostered by Romania's Communist Party and believed in by the Romanian people (some of whom continue to believe it). Thus, many Romanian historians hailed Antonescu as a great national leader for his decision to join Nazi Germany in fighting the Soviet Union – in order to liberate Bessarabia and northern Bukovina. In order not to diminish Antonescu's stature, the historians passed over in silence the issue of the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Jews.

Until the end of Ceausescu's rule, there was general reluctance in Romania to discuss the areas where many of the atrocities against the Jews took place. The reason for this was *real-politik,* the fear of the Romanian regime that

bringing up the subjects of Bessarabia and northern Bukovina might lead to conflict with the Soviet Union. Thus, the regime and its historians had a common interest in avoiding the subject even though their motivations were different.

3. The Post-Communist Period

In the post-Communist period there is no official Romanian historiography of the Holocaust. Nevertheless, the large majority of Romanian historians still retain nationalistic perspectives. Therefore, although most of them follow in the steps of the historiography of the Communist regime, they are deeply interested in the rehabilitation of Antonescu, which was not possible under the Communists. Their views differ radically from those of Israeli and other historians who are concerned with Antonescu and his policy toward the Jews. In the latter context several works by scholars from abroad have recently been published in Romania about the deportations to Transnistria and the slaughter that preceded it. Both Jean Ancel from Jerusalem and Radu Ioanid from Washington, D.C. have made considerable use of historical documentation in Romanian and Russian archives. In addition, a collection of documents was recently published by the Federation of Jewish Communities in Romania.[12]

The difference in approaches between scholars who want to minimize or deny the Holocaust of Romanian Jewry and those who want to study it in all its complexity is clear. The desire of the majority of Romanian historians (Gheorghe Buzatu, Nicolae Radu, Gheorghe Romanescu,[13] et al.) to rehabilitate Antonescu lead them to falsify history in regard to every aspect of his major role in the Holocaust of the Jews of Bessarabia, Bukovina, and Transnistria. To begin with, these historians minimize the number of Jewish victims while they scarcely relate to what happened to those deported to Transnistria

12. *Martiriul Evreilor din România* (Martyrology of the Jews of Romania) (Bucharest, 1991).
13. G.Buzatu, "Cîți Cunosc Documentele Essentiale Ale Epocii Antonescu?" (How many know the essential documents of the Antonescu Era?), *Cronica*, 17, Feb. 1-15, 1993; N. Radu, "Genocid, Holocaust, Shoah: O Mare Diversiune Jidovească" (Genocide, Holocaust, Shoah: a great Jewish diversion), *Europa*, Vol. 3, No. 88, Aug. 11-18, 1992; G. Romanescu, "Pinia Unui Istoric Militar" (The opinion of a military historian), ibid, Vol. 4, No. 153, Nov. 25-30, 1993.

and the slaughter beforehand. At the same time, they stress the fact that the Jews in Romania within its 1940-1944 borders were saved thanks to Antonescu's refusal to submit to German pressure to send them to death camps in Poland. This is true but they ignore the fact that the motivations for the Romanian leader's actions clearly related not to any positive feeling for Jews but reflected the realization that the war was beginning to turn against the Axis powers.

In their attempt to praise Antonescu for his courage in taking up arms against the USSR, Romanian nationalist historians emphasize his leadership in 1940 during the most difficult crisis in Romania's history after it lost territories to the Soviet Union, Hungary, and Bulgaria. However, they make no attempt to explain the contradiction between Antonescu's alliance with Hitler and his decisive role in the severing of Bessarabia, northern Bukovina, northern Transylvania, and northern Dorohoi from Romania and their annexation to Romania's neighbors. Nor do they deal with the issue of the difference between a Nazi-occupied country and a Nazi ally, which was the status of their own country. However, as long as historians in Israel and the West pursue research that continues to illuminate the crimes of Antonescu against the Jews, the efforts of the Romanian historians to rehabilitate Antonescu will be challenged.

Nevertheless, the rehabilitation of Antonescu continues not only on the level of historiography but also on the public level. This can be seen by the way nationalist figures of various stripes in the Romanian parliament and outside it have succeeded in naming streets in a number of cities after Antonescu and in erecting monuments to his memory.

However, there are exceptions to this trend toward rehabilitation. A few Romanian historians, such as Dinu Giurescu, have published articles about the fate of the Jews, for example, about pogroms against the Jews in Bessarabia and northern Bukovina and the deportations to Transnistria, as well as the fate of the Jews of southern Bukovina and the Dorohoi district.[14] This was apparently the first time such an article appeared in a historical journal of this

14. *Magazin Istoric*, Oct. 1997, pp. 47-51, Nov. 1997, pp. 72-76.

kind. Despite his minimization of the number of Jewish victims, Giurescu does attribute responsibility for these victims to the Romanian head of state:

> On the basis of documents now published, one can see that the decision for the destruction and deportation of the Jews of Bessarabia and northern Bukovina was taken by the head of the government [Antonescu's name is not mentioned explicitly] who left the execution of the decision to his officials and that at least half of the deportees to Transnistria perished during the death marches to this location – as a result of hunger and cold, lack of medicine, and other sufferings caused them.

Giurescu adds that in the course of the deportations many Jews were shot by Romanian soldiers.

The historian Andrei Pippidi is one of the few post-Communist historians to condemn the denial by Romanian historians of the Holocaust in their region. He did so in his article "The Game of Remembering and Forgetting" that was published in a Romanian periodical in January 1995. Pippidi wrote:

> Antonescu began a war not only against an armed enemy but also against masses of defenseless citizens. The fate of the Jewish population in Romania within its 1941-1944 borders took the form of organized robbery, deportations, and murder. Can we forget the terrible names of the concentration camps Edimeţi, Secureni, Vertujeni, Pechora (Peciora), and Vapniarka. The number of victims of this Holocaust whose initiator was Ion Antonescu reached 120,000. This figure does not include the Jews from the region of Odessa and Transnistria, who were killed during the advance of the Romanian army.[15]

These two scholars are an exception to the prevailing nationalist trend in Romanian historiography. They provide reason to hope that the historiographical conflict among Romanian historians and between them and historians in Israel and the West may eventually lead to further research that will clarify Romania's history in all that concerns the Holocaust during Antonescu's rule. Any objective research in this area will have to deal with two aspects of Antonescu's policies and the Jews. The first concerns the Roma-

15. A. Pippidi, "Jocul memoriei şi al uitării" (The game of remembering and forgetting) in *Rezerva de sperantă*, cited in V. Eskenasy, op. cit., p. 217.

nian leader's responsibility for the deaths of more than 300,000 Jews.[16] The second concerns Antonescu's motivation for resisting German pressure in 1942 to deport the Jews from the Regat and southern Transylvania to concentration camps in Poland.

Encouraging evidence of a new way that Romanian authorities have recently begun dealing with the subject of the Holocaust of the Jews of Romania can be seen in two developments. One of these is the unprecedented, official letter of the former president of Romania, Emil Constantinescu to the head of the Federation of Jewish Communities in Romania, Professor Nicolae Cajal, in connection with Holocaust Day of 1997. This letter said:

> We are all aware that Romanians participated, in the blindness of their soul, in the execution of the perverse Nazi plan for the "final solution." On more than one occasion during the war the Romanian authorities attempted to oppose the Nazi demands for the total annihilation of the Jewish population. [...] However, the very same authorities organized deportations, established camps, and carried out a racist policy. We today feel responsible for the drastic consequences of these acts. The killing of hundreds of thousands of Jews throughout Romanian territory has left a burden in our hearts, in the heart of all Romanians. The deaths of innocents can not be forgiven, can not be rectified, and can not be forgotten. It is our duty to remember the victims of the Shoah always, to make certain that this matter will never be forgotten, not any fact nor any name.

To the best of our knowledge, this letter has neither been published in the Romanian press nor issued as an official public declaration, as one might have expected. However, it was published by the bi-monthly magazine of the Federation of Jewish communities in Romania.[17]

Despite the fact that the letter does not mention Transnistria by name or the mass murders that preceded the deportations there, it still has considerable importance. The President did admit that Romanians took part in the "final

16. This estimate of the number of victims is given in the books of Carp, Ancel, and the article of Eskenasy. This figure does not include the large number of local, Ukrainian Jews who were killed by Romanians or deported beyond the Bug, an area that was under German rule, and who perished there.
17. *Realitatea Evreiască*, June 1997.

solution." His use of the phrase "throughout Romanian territory" implicitly includes Bessarabia and northern Bukovina, where "hundreds of thousands of innocent Jews were killed." The significance of this letter lies in the fact that such ideas were expressed by the President of Romania as a response to the trend in Romanian historiography that has tended to deny or minimize the Holocaust of Romanian Jewry.

The second noteworthy and promising development was the publication, on January 4, 1999, of a directive by the Romanian Ministry of Education which calls for the rapid introduction of lessons in high schools on the history of the Holocaust. In connection with this the Ministry of Education has undertaken to send history teachers to seminars run by the Yad Vashem Holocaust education center in Jerusalem. Although the directive did not explicitly refer to any need or intention to focus on the Holocaust in Romania, it seems doubtful that this subject can be avoided.

The two developments just discussed are signs of change. Romanian historiography of the Holocaust of the Jews under the fascist regime of Antonescu, is starting to emerge, at least in part, and with some official support, from a stage of denial. Not only outside Romania but inside it as well, some historians and others are exhibiting a willingness to reexamine some key myths relating to the actions of their leadership and of the people during the Holocaust. There is now some hope that such few but very significant phenomena will contribute to making public knowledge that will impede the efforts of those Romanian historians who wish to rehabilitate Antonescu and to conceal his responsibility for the deaths of over 300,000 Jews prior to the deportations, during them, and after them – in Transnistria itself.

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